What Role Did Women Play in Ancient Rome?

Their lives and value were defined almost solely in relation to men: their fathers and husbands. But some women found ways to claim their own power.

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Women in ancient Rome, whether free or enslaved, played many roles: empress, priestess, goddess, shop owner, midwife, prostitute, daughter, wife and mother. But they lacked any voice in public life.

They also lacked a voice in history. With few exceptions—like the words of the female poet Sulpicia or the graffiti of a woman summoning her lover, found scrawled on the walls at Pompeii—what we know about them comes almost entirely from the writings of men in Rome's most elite circles.

As in many cultures, women's value in ancient Rome was defined almost solely in relation to their fathers and husbands; the majority were married off by their mid teens. No Roman woman could vote, play a direct role in political or military affairs or otherwise play an official part in how the republic and, later, the empire was run. Still, we can glimpse tantalizing signs of women—usually those of the highest wealth, education and family status—finding ways to claim new powers and rights for themselves. Sometimes they did so through influencing the men in their lives, occasionally by claiming a religious role in society and more rarely by obtaining a degree of legal and economic independence.

What Ancient Roman Men Wrote About Women

"She is highly intelligent and a careful housewife, and her devotion to me is a sure sign of her virtue," scholar Pliny the Younger wrote in a letter of his teenage bride, Calpurnia—who, at about 15, was some 25 years younger than him when they wed. Pliny also affectionately lauded his wife's ability to memorize his writings.

Others described women far more scathingly. Ovid, the famous poet of the early empire, believed women's "primitive" sex drive rendered them irrational. Roman politician and lawyer Cicero reminded a jury that their ancestors placed women "in the power of *tutores"* (or guardians) because of *infirmitas consilii,* or weak judgment. Marcus Porcius Cato, one of Republican Rome's most revered statesmen, warned fellow Romans of the risks of treating a woman as as equal, asserting that "they will from that moment become your superiors."

Perhaps Roman satirist Juvenal offered the most scathing opinions in his famously misogynistic *Sixth Satire*, written in the second century A.D. Among his complaints: Women shirked any risky but worthwhile enterprise. They were prone to promiscuity, and most annoying when they dared to flaunt intellectual opinions. And heaven help the man whose mother-in-law has a pulse: "All chance of domestic harmony is lost while your wife's mother is living."

The Model Roman Matron

According to Rome's legal and social code—written and unwritten—the ideal Roman woman was a matron who spun her own cloth, oversaw her family's affairs, provided her husband with children, food and a well-run household, and displayed suitable modesty. Females who defied this stereotype often ended up outcasts.

For much of ancient Roman history, women didn't even have the right to their own name, almost always taking a feminine version of her father's family name. So, Gaius Julius or Marcus Terentius would have daughters named, respectively, Julia and Terentia. In the case of multiple daughters, they'd be differentiated by a suffix: Julia Major for the eldest, Julia Minor for the next—and Julia Tertia for a third.

Religion Opened the Doors

The election of a Vestal Virgin in ancient Rome. To be allowed entry into the order, a girl had to be free of physical and mental defects, have two living parents and be a daughter of a free-born resident of Rome. The Vestal Virgins were priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. From Hutchinson's History of the Nations, published 1915.

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While ancient Roman society was dominated by men, the pantheon of Roman gods was not. Of the three supreme deities worshipped by ancient Romans, only one—Jupiter, the king of the gods—was male. The other two were Juno, chief goddess and protectress of the empire, and Minerva, Jupiter's daughter and the goddess of

wisdom and war.

The Vestal Virgins—or the priestesses of Vesta—ranked among the city's most important residents. Appointed before puberty and required to remain chaste for 30 years, the six young women held sacred duties, like preserving the hearth fire in Vesta's temple (the belief was that if the fire died, so would Rome), and other significant tasks, like safeguarding wills of the wealthiest and most prominent Romans, such as Julius Caesar. The priestesses' religious significance gave them unusual power and influence—and they occasionally used it, as when they intervened to save a young Caesar from the dictator Sulla.

Roman Women Piggybacked on Male Power

Extremely limited public lives didn't stop a series of savvy ancient Roman women—all from the elite class—from carving out pockets of influence for themselves alongside their menfolk.

One of the earliest influential female role models in the Roman republic was Cornelia, daughter of famed Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus. Well educated and raised in the house of a military and political leader, she emerged as an intelligent presence in Roman society during her marriage and as a young widow. She spurned offers of marriage (including one from the Egyptian pharaoh, Ptolemy VIII), instead devoting herself to raising her three surviving children. When her two sons, the Gracchi brothers (whom she called "her jewels") later embarked on populist reforms, she backed them staunchly in public, while guiding and sometimes chiding them in her letters. "May Jupiter not for a single instant allow you to continue in these actions nor permit such madness to come into your mind," she wrote to her younger son, Gaius Sempronius Gracchus. Both sons were assassinated by a conservative Roman faction, but Cornelia retained widespread awe and respect both for her learning and for her devotion to family and state.

For her part, Faustina the Younger was surrounded by imperial power: Daughter of emperor Antoninus Pius, she was married at 15 to future emperor Marcus Aurelius and bore 14 children, one of whom became emperor Commodus. One of the few women granted the title Augusta, the highest status a woman could receive, Faustina was revered by the military when she accompanied her husband on his campaigns—and seems to have been cherished by her husband, who named her *Mater Castrorum*, or "mother of the camp." When she died, Marcus Aurelius mourned her, deified her and then founded a series of schools for orphan girls in her name.

Powerful Women Faced Backlash

The more powerful the woman, the more likely she was to face backlash from men. (Faustina certainly had her share of detractors.)

Livia, the wife of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, had a tremendous influence on her husband: One near-contemporary account by Suetonius recounts that Augustus would compile careful lists of items on which he wanted his wife's input—counsel that often overrided that of his advisors.

Despite her devotion to weaving and other feminine pursuits, Livia drew harsh criticism. Roman historian Tacitus damned her for posterity in his *Annals* as "a real catastrophe to the nation" who exercised so much control over an aging Augustus that "he exiled his only surviving grandson." Before long, she gained the

reputation of having not only poisoned Augustus's grandsons but the emperor himself.

The powerful women surrounding emperor Nero fared even worse. Agrippina, his mother and staunch advocate, had cannily maneuvered her way to power, mostly through marriage (and possibly murder), also receiving the revered title of Augusta. But after working to set young Nero up as emperor (and acting as his regent), she shouldered the blame for the murders of his rival stepbrother, Britannicus, and his stepfather, the emperor Claudius, her third husband. Nero himself conspired to kill her, as he did his own wife, Poppaea, who also had exerted a powerful influence over him.

Changes in Status

The age of Augustus brought some of the most significant changes in the status of women. While unmarried women faced hefty penalties, and the laws punishing adulterous women were toughened, the Julian laws also allowed women who bore at least three children to win exemption from the guardianship of a man.

In spite of the male prism through which we know these women, their humanity and diversity emerge. As the centuries passed, women in ancient Rome increasingly emerged from the long shadow cast both by their male society and the self-sacrificing female ideals. We may never know their names, but their stories emerge piecemeal from the fragments of letters and inscriptions they and their families left behin